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Unique opportunity for wilderness

"In wildness is the preservation of the world." With these words, Henry David Thoreau began serious discussion about the place of wild lands in the American landscape. Ever since he wrote these words, American wilderness — in both theory and practice — has centered on the towering mountains, vast plains, and rich forests of the West. But just as the forests and the moose are returning to their homes in the landscape of Vermont and the Northeast, so, too, can the focus of wilderness return to the home of its first advocate and the country's first protected wilderness areas in the Adirondacks and Catskills of New York.

With the introduction of the Vermont Wilderness Act of 2006 by Senators Jeffords and Leahy and Representative Sanders, we are presented with a tremendous opportunity to protect more wilderness in our Green Mountain National Forest. We should not let this opportunity slip away, for wilderness in Vermont and in the Northeast is of special significance to demonstrate to the nation and many other parts of the world how human and natural communities can thrive across a large landscape.

Wilderness in Vermont can play three important roles in the continuing development of the concept and in the broader evolution of our place in nature.

First, Vermont wilderness can play a crucial role in the design and development of a comprehensive ecological reserve system in the state and region. Conservation biology tells us that in order to best conserve, enhance, and restore native biological diversity, we need a system of core reserves, connected to other reserves across a well-managed landscape.

The vast majority of land in Vermont (and the Northeast) is privately owned (nearly 90 percent for both Vermont and the region). Since wilderness will not be managed for profit, it is unlikely that many private landowners would be willing to declare their lands reserves.

Furthermore, wilderness protection is a compelling public interest, so we should look to public lands as the most likely location for ecological reserves. In Vermont, the Green Mountain National Forest dwarfs all

other public holdings.

National forest wilderness areas will constitute the wild core of Vermont and serve as the most significant ecological reserves in the state. If the bill passes, Vermont will have several wilderness areas approaching the minimum size (25,000 to 40,000 acres) needed for reserves to absorb natural disturbances without loss of native biodiversity. To ensure long-term viability as ecological reserves, the bill should be improved to include the entire Lye Brook-Glastenbury region.

Second, designation of more wilderness in Vermont underscores the continuing evolution of the idea of wilderness, an understanding more spatially and temporally grounded. Wilderness in Vermont is, in almost all cases, wilderness in recovery — typically forests that have been entirely cleared and grazed for decades. This is different from most wilderness in the West, where the human touch has been comparatively light.

But given the resilience of ecosystems here and plentiful precipitation, Vermont's forests have rebounded and will recover further, making them fitting for wilderness protection. Understanding that wildernesses in different areas can have different histories and different management needs can broaden our understanding of wilderness without diminishing it.

Finally, given the relatively smaller scale of wilderness in Vermont and the Northeast than in the West, management of adjacent lands is all the more important. This is a great opportunity, since landscapes around the world resemble those of Vermont — pockets of wilderness on public lands in a managed private landscape — more than those of the West, where the federal government owns tremendous amounts of the landscape.

We need to learn how to make the entire landscape work together better, working with groups like the Vermont Forum on Sprawl to make our human communities more livable and groups like the Northeast Organic Farming Association, Vermont Family Forests, and the Vermont Land Trust working to make our managed farms and forests more sustainable. As a society we need to understand better how to weave our wilderness, our farms and managed forests, and our cities and towns together, and Vermont can lead the way.

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